

New Study „A Long Lifespan, But Not for All: How social divisions affect life expectancy“

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For more than a century average life expectancy has been rising. Can this trend continue? Longevity optimists are convinced that there are already people alive today who may very well grow 150 years old. However, there exist marked differences with regard to life expectancy across different regions and social strata. In its new study, the Berlin Institute shows how global differences in life expectancy come about. Society and politics are called upon to take action in various fields of action in order to compensate for health inequality.

We are getting older. At around 1900, mean life expectancy of the global population was as low as 30 years. Today, people live on average 71 years – this corresponds to an increase of 3.5 years per decade. Women in Japan are frontrunners in that they average 87 years. According to projections, South Korean girls born in 2030 might even reach over 90 years.

At first sight this may appear like a continuous trend. Even places where the increase in life expectancy has come to a halt or was reversed – for instance, in the 1990s as a result of the HIV epidemics in Africa and Asia – are making up ground again. Growing life expectancy in the industrial nations mostly results from improvements in modern medicine and prevention which enabled older-aged individuals to survive and live longer.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that we may have reached a biological maximum. As a result of aging, health care systems are likely to push towards financial limits as well. Above all, it is possible to discern regional and class-specific particularities. For example, newly born boys in the wealthy Bavarian district of Starnberg in Germany can be expected to live about eight years longer as their same-sex counterparts in the former shoe industry town of Pirmasens in Rhineland-Palatinate. In the US, no less than 20 years lie between the county with the highest and the one with the lowest average life expectancy.

“Many studies point out two decisive factors for health inequality and, as a result, the risk of premature death: social status and educational level”, says Reiner Klingholz, Director of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development. The lower the socio-economic status, the higher the subjectively perceived strain from stress. Under constant pressure stress facilitates the development of physical diseases, depressions and other psychological disorders. In addition, risk factors for health such as the lack of exercise, overweight, and smoking occur disproportionately frequently within groups with low social status. "Society and politics need to take measures towards reducing these inequalities”, states the study in conclusion.

This study was financed by the GfK Verein and is available as free PDF download:

<http://www.berlin-institut.org/en/publications/studies-in-english/a-long-lifespan-but-not-for-all.html>

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